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New Bomb Feared By U.S. Since '66

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 3 — Analysts here have been worried for almost 14 months that the Soviet Union was developing an orbital bombing system.

The development of such a weapons system does not violate the treaty on outer space, as Administration officials have emphasized in recent months.

The treaty prohibits the stationing of weapons of mass destruction in space, but not the development of the techniques for doing so. Furthermore, weapons that do not stay in space for one complete orbit are not considered to be in space.

Although the United States rejected years ago the idea of stationing bombs in orbit, citing inefficiency and high cost, military strategists have feared for some time that the Soviet Union might "at least explore the advantages of such a system."

The first clue that exploration might have begun came on Sept. 17, 1966. Since then the Russians have fired at least 11 development shots, the most recent last Saturday.

In the intervening year the strategists have tried to reexamine their views on orbital bombs. In doing so they have concluded that any reasons the Soviet Union had for the flights had to do with the bombardment from space or from near-orbital trajectories.

Though the reasons do not seem strong enough to American experts for stationing bombs in orbit in violation of an international treaty, they point out that Moscow once violated the voluntary moratorium on nuclear tests in the atmosphere when that suited its purpose.

The strategists argue that Moscow must have some reason it considers valid for spending the resources necessary to put objects into low semi-orbits 11 times in 13 months.

Defense Difficult

As Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara confirmed today in announcing United States knowledge of the tests, a defense against such a weapon is difficult.

In the worst of circumstances there would be only three minutes' warning time. Even the orbital weapon's target is not known until it is 500 miles away from the target, when a rocket motor fires to hurtle it down through the atmosphere.

The United States has developed the techniques of knocking down enemy satellites but, as far as is known, antisatellite missiles are deployed at few sites around the globe.

Furthermore, antisatellite weapons need a fair amount of warning before tracking radars and computers can figure out the trajectory they should follow for an interception.

Antiballistic missile weapons could presumably be used against the kind of weapons Mr. McNamara described today. But these, too, are still in the development stage.

The United States has made the decision to deploy a so called "thin" antimissile system against the potential threat of Chinese intercontinental missiles. But it has no such system to defend against Russian missiles or near orbital weapons.

Since the United States elected years ago not to develop bombs in orbit, analysts here have trouble trying to decide why the Soviet Union decided to explore the weapon.

The first test shot, fired out of the main Russian space base of Tyuratam more than a year ago, exploded into hundreds of pieces in several different orbits.

The launching used a new trajectory, inclined at 49 degrees from the Equator, indicating either a new launching pad, a new rocket or possibly a new guidance system in an older rocket.

Western experts apparently still do not know why this shot, and a second on Nov. 2, 1966, exploded. The destruction may have been deliberate to learn what kind of pictures the pieces of rockets presented on a defender's radar screens.

Neither shot was announced by the Soviet Union. On Jan. 25, 1967, a third shot in the test series was fired from Tyuratam.

This time, it was given the designation Cosmos 139. Cosmos is what Western experts consider a cover-all name for scientific satellites, unmanned flights of man-carrying capsules, military reconnaissance satellites and many other shots that the Soviet Union prefers not to discuss in detail.

Whereas the analysts first thought that the Soviet Union hoped to hide the intent of the near-orbital tests, the shift to the use of Cosmos numbers and the use of a new format for announcements concerning the flights finally persuaded the analysts that the Soviet Union was deliberately calling them to the attention of the West.

Why the Soviet Union should do this is still not understood here, according to knowledge sources. One view is that the Soviet Union would like to force the United States into spending enough money to investigate the techniques. Another is that the Soviet Union is trying to use the flights to frighten the United States or perhaps Communist China.

Secretary McNarama observed that if the tests were of orbital weapons, as "is conceivable," the Soviet Union could "achieve an initial operational capability during 1968."

Since last January, the shots in this series have been Cosmos 160 on May 17, Cosmos 169 on July 18, Cosmos 170 on July 31, Cosmos 171 on Aug. 8, Cosmos 178 on Sept. 19, Cosmos 179 on Sept. 22, Cosmos 183 on Oct. 18 and Cosmos 187 last Saturday.

Mr. McNamara said that the vehicles used to date would have a low accuracy and carry only one to 3 megaton warheads.

But sources here are concerned that these flights may be using only small developmental rockets and that larger ones might follow.

The Soviet Union has demonstrated the ability to put between 40,000 and 60,000 pounds of weight into orbit with one rocket, far more than the weights involved in the near-orbital tests.

If the Soviet Union is developing a launching rocket in the class of the United States Saturn 5, as many officials believe, it could put into orbit nearly 150 tons of weight.